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ABSTRACT

YOUTH DARES (Dynamic Alternatives for Rehabilitation through Educational Services) believes there are three major environments youth come into contact with or that impact on their development: the family, the educational system, and the "street." An element missing from all of these environments is youth participation. A fourth environment must be created to bring all the environments in contact with one another and to draw upon their positive traits. Youth must be allowed the freedom to make their own choices in the formation and maintenance of this fourth environment. YOUTH DARES has implemented a series of processes to develop, establish, and maintain a high degree of youth participation in its programming. There are two youth representatives on the agency's Board of Directors. The agency places a priority on hiring young people whenever possible. The agency sponsors an alternative high school program with five components (academics, internships, group, student government, and parent workshops). The student government is modeled after the U.S. government. Government committees include the law, sports, finance, fund-raising, newsletter, graduation, special events, and Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) task force committees. Students have written their own Declaration of Independence and are working on their own Constitution. Empowering youth and "letting go" can result in a more cohesive and effective approach to working with youth. (NB)

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LETTING GO...

[Douglas Blancero]

"Letting Go..." is more than just letting young people be empowered, an oft used term these days. But, empowerment, if we must use that word, is never a simple process of "allowing" people to make their own decisions. It entails taking a hard look at the whole process, the whole system. It means taking a look at all the parties concerned--adults and youth alike. It is means risk taking for both parties as well, but mostly the adults. The mind set is usually adults know better, and moreover, it is their mandate to inform youth of that fact in order to protect them from making mistakes. As well intentioned as those feelings are, they can get in the way of truly "letting go". It is important that failure is experienced as well as success. Learning results from both.

Education is the foundation of any free society. It was one of the principal priorities of our founding fathers. Thomas Jefferson proposed education for all citizens "to enable every man to judge for himself what will secure or endanger his freedom." These words have even more importance in today's world and our efforts of "letting go". In the book "Winning the Brain Race" the authors state, "We are producing a generation of young Americans that neither understands nor appreciates democracy. They do not have the education to develop a solid commitment to those `notions and sentiments' essential to a democratic form of government." Education is at the heart of "letting go".

In addition, there is also the issue of values and how to impart them in an educational setting. Many of the negative decisions young people make in regard to their lives are value decisions. It is the responsibility of education, in conjunction with the family, to teach a system of thought that incorporates a set of values. This is not the case and the result is obvious--behavior that is both self destructive and/or harmful to others.

Both of these factors make a good argument of why we need to incorporate issues of youth leadership into education, not as a ancillary project , but as an integral part of the curriculum. When we do, we not only help youngsters reach their full potential, but we prepare citizens schooled in the art of democracy and conscious of their moral obligations as a person.

Probably, the best argument for youth involvement is the resultant success. The quality of work, the level of success and the morale of the participants are all noticeably higher when responsibility is shared among all [illegible] parties. As a quick side note, staff often

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need to be empowered as much as the young people they work alongside.

Lets take a step back and look at why we need to learn how to let our young people go or why we need a term like youth empowerment.

Simply put, we are products of our environment. YOUTH D.A.R.E.S. believes there are three major environments youth come into contact with or that impact on their development and growth. The first environment is the family, the basic unit of society. Unfortunately, it is the deterioration of this unit that is often at the core of future problems. The family should be the anchor in a child`s life: their source of identity. For any number of reasons, it is not. Some of the contributing factors are the recent (within the last 20 years) economic climate, the need for two working parents, the rising number of single parent families, early marriages, and youthful, unprepared parents. Another aspect of this environment is the "addictive family" in which the cycle of addiction is passed on from generation to generation. Parents, unconsciously, provide a set of values based on society's mixed messages that often prioritize results before process. The bottom line? Youngsters, maybe not all, but a good percentage, are not identifying with their families and an absence of early role models and security is apparent. This sets the stage for a poor self image, as well as a vacuum in their lives that needs to be filled by something.

The second environment youth come into contact with is the educational system. For many of our students, the school system is more "confrontational than educational". Often it is the same for the teachers as well. Other factors are the lack of meaning or relevance the subject matter has to the students, the impersonal environment of the schools, and the lack of student involvement in the educational process. High school graduates are finding no pot at the end of the rainbow. When we consider that we are dealing, in a large part, with a population of results orientated youngsters, the need for concrete not abstract benefits of a high school diploma becomes that much more important. Simply put: students need job guarantees, students need life living skills, students need to be able to apply learned skills to the real world. Recent studies seem to demonstrate that more learning is happening in the work place than in school. Literacy skills are developed to a degree never approached in the traditional school setting. So again, an environment which was intended to provide positive role models and an atmosphere of support, fails this percentage of students we are discussing. The results only reinforces the feelings of inadequacy, not only about themselves, but about the world around them.

The third environment these youth come into contact with is the "street". Both school and family breakdown have contributed to the "street" becoming the main vehicle of education where youth are presented with the stagnant role models of petty thieves and addicts. It is here in the street they find, maybe for the first time, acceptance. As long as they follow the mores of the group they are "hanging out" with they are not challenged. These groups are all the more cohesive because they are comprised of youths looking for the same thing: an identity and the acceptance and love that goes along with it. They think they have found it in the street and to some extent they are right. When we ask them to leave these "negative" groups we are also asking them to leave the "anchor" in their lives and the comfort that goes along with it. What complicates the situation is that there are some positive elements in these street groups: loyalty, sincere friendship, and unity. The other side though is that the streets establish a forum when many times it is the loudest, strongest, and/or richest personality that makes decision. There is not always the freedom to mature as an original thinker. Moreover, if this is the only environment that has offered some success, there is often not much desire to "rock the boat". No one wants to risk the chance of losing their place in the group.

An element missing from all of the environments described above is youth participation--meaningful participation. A fourth environment must be created. One that would bring all the environments in contact with each other and draw on their positive traits. One invaluable weapon is allowing youth the freedom to make their own choices in the forming of this environment and its maintenance.

We must ensure that the youth we serve are full partners in their treatment. If we are truly to respond to their needs then there must exist a system of communication. This communication must be two sided and not patronizing. Within the proper atmosphere youth can be motivated to invest in the program fostering a feeling of ownership, rather than that of belonging.

All of these factors bring us to the conclusion that the development of a new alternative system that addresses the needs of this population is necessary. The reasons for a new approach should be apparent to those who have been observers of the traditional educational system. The number of young people dropping out of the system is increasing, despite the reports that inform us of increasing "percentages" of graduating seniors. Those that are graduating seem not be adequately prepared for the real world of work. A conclusion might be that the existing educative process needs to be expanded so as to include new concepts which embrace non-traditional vehicles to educate our students.

Youth D.A.R.E.S believes the goals of an educational system are multi-faceted. In its most general sense this goal is the preparation of students to succeed in life as productive individuals of society, active citizens in their government and successful employees in the career of their choice. In its most specific sense education should impart to students the skills of critical and abstract thinking as well as the ability to problem solve. Armed with thinking skills students are not only able to learn in a variety of different arenas, but are also able to make healthy value judgements in their lives regarding such topics as addiction, relationships, and criminal activity. True learning occurs when one is able to transfer one's skills from one experience to another, from one forum to another.

The question now becomes how are such forums identified? And what material should be covered in these forums? The answer lies in partnerships. One invaluable partnership is with our young people. They are a limitless source of information, resources, insight and energy. Realistically invited, with all the commitment from the administration as with any other partnership, they will join enthusiastically. Developing programs without their input and cooperation is like a doctor treating a patient without asking the symptoms.

YOUTH D.A.R.E.S. has implemented a series of processes to develop, establish and maintain a high degree of youth participation in our programming. There is no doubt the success we experience is the direct result of this "partnership". The following are brief descriptions of these processes.

As stated previously, there must be a commitment from the administration for youth leadership and participation to really take off. That means allowing youth input from the top down. YOUTH D.A.R.E.S. has two youth representatives on the agency Board of Directors. Therefore, they have direct input on the formulation of policy, as well as major financial decisions. They are not junior members they are members.

The agency also places a priority on hiring young people whenever possible. Examples include filling such positions as administrative assistant, students aides, and filing clerks. But above and beyond these traditional "youth" positions YOUTH D.A.R.E.S. has hired young people to fill such roles as peer outreach workers dealing with such topics as AIDS awareness, substance abuse, and other health related issues. Most recently, we received funding for a "special assistant" to act as a liaison for youth. A recent graduate, presently attending college, was hired and is serving in that position.

Separate and apart from purely administrative and employment issues, programmatically youth are involved in numerous ways and capacities. As part of our alternative educational program we sponsor an alternative high school program. The program is divided into five components, all of equal importance. They are Academics, Internships, Group, Student Government and Parent Workshops. Students and their families are informed at the intake interview that all five parts are mandatory for the appropriate members of the family. All five parts are integral to the overall success of the student.

Academically, students work along with teachers on how to approach their work. Each week they meet to review the past weeks work and to plan the next week's work. Substantial input is expected form the students during these meetings. Students are free to work on the assignments in the manner or modality that suits them best. This freedom is maintained as long as students behave responsibly. Discussion is held on what constitutes "responsible". But the real key here is the relationship established between teacher and student, and its effect on the classroom material. The same holds true for the internship project. Students working with teachers decide on an appropriate work experience that will result in a true learning experience and can be translated into high school credits.

Group deals with various adolescent issues usually identified by young people themselves. It is also the vehicle that can be used to inject thoughts on values and morals as they apply to the daily lives of the students.

Student government, the fourth component of the school is probably the most graphic example of youth involvement and of "letting go" in our agency. While designing the alternative high school program, the reason stated time and time again by students as to what they would change was the impersonal manner they were treated. Ironically, similar feelings were expressed by teachers. As a result our student government was designed to be part of the curriculum, not an add on. To further underline its importance, one day a week, Fridays, is given over to the students to run their government. All students are required to attend. It is a normal school day except it is run by the students with guidance from the staff when requested.

The government is modeled after our own government of the United States. Two objectives are achieved in this manner. One, they learn to operate within a system. Two, they become familiar with the government they will be living under as they mature. Like the Federal government the student government is divided into three parts: Executive, Legislative and Judicial. After a nomination process and

campaign students elect a President, Vice-President, Secretary and Treasurer. These positions comprise the Executive Branch. The President is free to appoint advisors or chairs of committees to a "cabinet". All of the students make up the Legislative Branch. They are required to participate in committee work and must be able to demonstrate a concrete project or projects at the end of each semester. Committees include, but are not limited to law, sports, finance, fund-raising, newsletter, graduation, special events and an AIDS Task Force. Committees may be set up by the legislature or the President. Each committee has a chair appointed by the President, keeps their own records and makes weekly reports to the whole group. The individual focus of the committees is fairly self-explanatory.

The Law Committee is responsible for the drafting of bill, presenting these drafts to the legislature and having them passed as laws. They are also responsible for the accurate recording of these laws and the posting of these laws for public information. Other activities that have originated from the Law Committee are the writing of the school's Declaration of Independence and their own Constitution.

The Sports Committee plans sporting events such as handball and pool tournaments, student/staff volleyball games, basketball and softball games. They must provide participate with s complete set of rules and a schedule.

The Finance Committee is responsible for the accurate accounting of the government's funds. Each student pays $2.00 each week dues or tax. The money is deposited into a student government account. Two students and a staff person are signatories on the account. The Finance Committee reviews the monthly statements and expenditures. Additionally, they must prepare a budget, and submit it to the government for approval. The budget must include projected expenses and income.

The Fund-Raising Committee plans activities which will bring income into the student government to offset any shortfalls in the budget. Examples are the traditional raffles and candy sales as well as events such as celebrity sporting events, and tele-marketing projects.

The Newsletter Committee puts out a monthly newsletter. Students write, edit, and lay out the newsletter. In addition, they must cover the expense for printing and arrange for distribution.

The Graduation Committee plans any events related to the graduation ceremony at the end of the year. They are involved with fund-raising for the year book, as well as its printing. Students take the photographs, write the poems or

articles, lay out the book, design the jacket cover and negotiate with the printer.

The Special Events Committee is involved in the planning of trips, organizing of fund-raising events, special performances, and the like. Examples of events they have set up are cultural enrichment trips, job awareness trips, and recreational trips, especially the year end trip.

The AIDS Task Force is comprised of young people who have taken the extra commitment to be trained as peer educators, disseminate information, attend conferences, and get involved in related events. Some of the youth have volunteered to be trained as puppeteers working with life sized puppets in educating younger students in the local school district.

Another example of youth involvement is the writing of their own "Declaration of Independence" stating why they left the traditional educational system. This declaration is attached. It is the culmination of 3 weeks of discussion and work between students and staff. Presently, the students are working on their own "Constitution".

Students are also encouraged to develop entrepreneurial skills, One student has opened the first student owned and run business in the program. He did a marketing survey, made a presentation to the student body, sold shares, and opened up shop.

Students are also involved in curriculum development. One example is a collaborative effort among the Kings County District Attorney's Office, The New York Police Department and YOUTH D.A.R.E.S. to develop a law related studies course. A committee was set up with representatives from each of the before mentioned groups. Representing YOUTH D.A.R.E.S. was one teacher and three students. Together this committee is setting up a course with relevance for students.

In conclusion, when we "let go" everyone grows--youth and adults. "Letting go" means not judging the source of the input, but the input itself. It means taking advantage of all our resources. The result is a more cohesive and effective approach to working with youth and ourselves.

DOUGLAS BLANCERO

YOUTH D.A.R.K.S., 61ST PRECINCT YOUTH PROGRAM

DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

Why Declare Independence?

There are times when one group of teachers and students need to be free from the standard High School system. It is only right at such a time they should tell the world why this had to be.

What Rights Do All Teachers And Students Have?

We the students and teachers believe that the rights put forth now are inalienable and should not be neglected. Every teacher and student has rights. Some of these rights are: the right to an education; to teach; to learn; to question and be answered; the right to vote; to discuss; to choose schooling (such as scheduling, subjects, seating and work); the right to express oneself; and the right to be treated as a human being, not as a statistic or an identification number. All of these rights should take place in a secure environment.

Why Do Schools Exist?

It is to educate; to relate; to communicate; to accept; to help students become viable members of society; to prepare people for the job market; to become a mature and responsible adult; and to strive to help students reach their full potential.

When Can A School Be Changed?

1) A school can be changed to keep up with the times (such as with the computer age).

2) When the educational system decides to give up their dictatorship and give some of their power to the students and the teachers.

3) When old laws and ways of teaching are not working out for the good of students and teachers.

What Other Things Has The School System Done Wrong?

1) The school system abuses it's powers by having the last word in what goes on in our classrooms and our schools.

2) The school system has enforced captive lunches. It is not fair that students have to eat what the system wants to give us.

3) They did not listen to us when we had ideas and changes. They might have heard us, but did nothing about it.

How Have We Acted?

1) We cut out of classes and stopped doing class work, homework and taking tests.

2) Out of frustration we acted out abusively towards teachers and students and defaced the school property.

3) We quit regular high school and joined alternative high school programs.

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What Are We As Representatives Of The School Doing?

1) We set up a government, for the students, that is run by the students. It allows us to make our own decisions on what goes on in our school. It also allows us to make changes where needed and to govern ourselves the way we believe is right.

2) We the students and teachers have collaborated to successfully achieve all of the above.

3) We are declaring our independence as students and teachers by writing this, our **Declaration Of Independence.**

President

Vice President

Secretary

Treasurer

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